

Bryan Nash: Topical Preaching and Otherness

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A Conversational Topical Preaching Proposal

Bryan Nash

Abstract

This article suggests that topical preaching can be revisited with integrity in postmodernity. The topical sermon in postmodernity should seek to place texts in conversation with one another in such a way that each text is valued and respected. Instead of allowing only one text to be heard at the exclusion of all others, appropriate topical preaching should model the embrace of otherness and conversation.

Within the field of homiletics, topical preaching is generally regarded with disdain. To say that one preaches topically is practically to say that one does not preach at all. It is not difficult to see why topical preaching has such a negative reputation. The topical preaching of the past was often lacking in theological roots and hermeneutical method. Sermons consisted of unrelated texts used to support the preconceived position of the preacher. However, as Ronald Allen observes, “malpractice does not mean that topical preaching itself is malefaction.”¹ In this article I wish to suggest that preachers are in a unique time in which topical preaching can be revisited with integrity in the homiletical landscape.

1. Topical Preaching in the Homiletics Literature

Over the last several decades, few major homiletics texts have addressed topical preaching.² David Buttrick’s *Homiletic* is an exception.³ Buttrick avoids referring to sermons as topical. Instead, he refers to situational preaching in the praxis mode. This approach to preaching does not begin with a text but rather “starts with a hermeneutic of lived experience.”⁴ Preaching in the mode of praxis requires a reverse sequence from that of preaching from Scripture. Buttrick contends that in the case of the latter, the preacher moves “from text to a contemporary field of meaning in consciousness (shaped by theological understanding and analogies of experience) to a

¹ Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching the Topical Sermon*, Louisville 1992, x.

² For a bibliography of works that do address the topical sermon, see *ibid.*, 145, 153.

³ David Buttrick, *Homiletic, Moves and Structures*, Philadelphia 1987, 405–448.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 405.

congregational situation.”⁵ In the case of preaching a situation, the preacher begins with a situation then shifts “to a theological review of the situation in Christian consciousness, and then, possibly, to particular passages *if* they have been connected to theological understanding in consciousness and are, therefore, at hand.”⁶

Buttrick suggests that the sermon should not turn immediately to Scripture because people do not turn immediately to Scripture when interpreting situations. Instead, Christian consciousness understands a situation in light of theological understandings and then one finds Scriptures that one believes are pertinent. Furthermore, Buttrick does not believe that the move to Scripture is necessary in order for the sermon to be considered a sermon. Situational sermons may use Scripture, but care must be exercised so that Scripture is not misused and abused.⁷

For Buttrick, not just any topic is appropriate for a sermon. Three criteria are given. First, “a situation *ought* to connect with profound ontological or historical questions.”⁸ Second, “a situation ought to relate to the store of unanswered questions [...] of meaning and morality.”⁹ Third, “a situation ought to fit into structures of Christian consciousness.”¹⁰

Buttrick notes that arranging the sermon is necessary yet hesitates to offer a fixed form. Instead of offering a series of moves, he opts instead to offer an overall strategy. The sermon in the mode of praxis should offer a description of the situation, offer a rereading of the situation, the situation must be reinterpreted, and a new understanding or course of action should be portrayed.¹¹

The next serious treatment of topical preaching is Allen’s *Preaching the Topical Sermon*. Allen defines a topic as “a need, an issue, or a situation which is important to the congregation.”¹² For Allen, the topic should be interpreted in light of God’s unconditional love of creation and God’s desire for justice.¹³ The preacher should attempt to develop a thorough understanding of the topic so that the topic will not be misrepresented.

Similar to Buttrick, Allen holds that Scripture may be used, but Scripture does not have to be referenced in the topical sermon. However, if Scripture is referenced, it should be interpreted within the literary, historical, and theological context.¹⁴ It would be better not to use Scripture than

⁵ Ibid., 419.

⁶ Ibid., 419.

⁷ Ibid., 420.

⁸ Ibid., 425.

⁹ Ibid., 425.

¹⁰ Ibid., 425.

¹¹ Ibid., 430.

¹² Allen (note 1), 3.

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

to misuse Scripture.¹⁵ The topical sermon does not begin with Scripture, but rather begins with a situation and interprets the situation theologically. That is, in light of the gospel. One of the main benefits of the topical sermon for Allen is that topical preaching “teaches the congregation how to interpret life in light of the gospel.”¹⁶

Allen suggests several situations in which the topical sermon is appropriate.¹⁷ The topical sermon is appropriate when time is short or there is an urgent need. For example, tragedy may strike the congregation on Saturday, and the expository sermon prepared during the week is no longer appropriate. The topical sermon is appropriate when Scripture is silent on an issue – the existence of God is such an issue. Scripture presupposes the existence of God. The topical sermon can be appropriate when there is no single text that offers a definitive statement on an issue. The topical sermon can be appropriate in dealing with harmful texts, such as those that contain anti-Semitic overtones. Finally, the topical sermon can be helpful when there is no decisive Christian viewpoint of the issue. In such a situation the preacher may offer a tentative preference, but note that there is not a correct, Christian understanding of the issue. Such a topical sermon may help the congregation appreciate the complexity of situations.

In terms of form, Allen offers six suggestions.¹⁸ First, for topics that are straightforward and not controversial, a deductive form may be appropriate. The sermon can state the preacher’s position, describe the situation, interpret the situation theologically, and make applications. Second, the Methodist quadrilateral may be appropriate for some topics. In this form, the topic is evaluated in light of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Third, although not advocating for viewing the sermon as group counseling, Allen finds that a pattern of moral reasoning can be appropriate for the topical sermon. Such a sermon would begin with experience, move to analysis, and finally to decision and strategy. There may be times when an inductive model is useful for topical preaching. An inductive approach may be especially helpful when dealing with controversial issues. Fifth, Allen follows Buttrick in suggesting a sermon which moves from the situation to a re-reading of the situation, to a reinterpretation of the situation, to a new course of action. Finally, Allen revisits an older homiletical form which divides the sermon into mind, heart, and will. The preacher explains the topic, stirs emotions about the topic, and then helps the congregation make a decision regarding the topic.

In addition to Buttrick and Allen, Lance Pape has made a significant contribution to the discussion on topical preaching. Pape wrestles with the question of how a preacher might approach

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 19–35.

¹⁸ Ibid., 75–92.

the task of being asked to preach on a particular topic.¹⁹ In order to develop his proposal, Pape dialogues with Paul Ricoeur.²⁰ For Ricoeur, the sense of a text is not behind it but rather the possible world that is in front of it.²¹ The world that is in front of the text is not a window through which one might be able to look at other times and places. Instead, texts provide the reader with alternative ways of being in the present world. Texts shape the reader's consciousness.

Pape uses this phenomenology of reading to state the problem of topical preaching. That is, this process is interrupted when one approaches a text looking for a topic. "A seriously imaginable way of being that is commensurate with that strange new world is always the 'topic.'"²²

Having connected Ricoeur with topical preaching, Pape brings Han Frei into the discussion.²³ Drawing upon Frei, Pape observes that the Gospels are not about any particular topic. The Gospels are about a person. Thus, Jesus is the exemplar of any particular way of living. It is incorrect to say that Jesus was loving based upon a predetermined understanding of love. In actuality, we know love because we know the main character of the Gospels – Jesus.

Applying this insight to topical preaching, Pape proposes that it would be incorrect to ask what Jesus said about a particular topic, as if the Gospels are collections of sayings about various topics. The question that can be asked is, "What would it mean to ponder X in the presence of Jesus?"²⁴ Within this approach, the topic will appear in a new light in the presence of Jesus. Therefore, a new world can be imagined in the Ricoeurian sense.

2. Preaching and Otherness

I wish to draw upon the insights of Buttrick, Allen, and Pape in order to suggest a way of preaching topically which is appropriate to the church in postmodernity. Specifically, I am interested in the recognition of otherness. According to Emmanuel Levinas, the way toward becoming conscious of the other is through exposure to the other.²⁵ Homiletics has made great

¹⁹ *Lance B. Pape*, Preaching about Stewardship. An Encounter with Jesus in the World "in front of" the Synoptics, in: *Practical Matters* 8 (2015), 63–74.

²⁰ *Paul Ricoeur*, *Interpretation Theory. Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth 1976.

²¹ See also *Lance B. Pape*, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say. Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching*, Waco, 2013.

²² *Pape* (note 19), 67.

²³ *Hans W. Frei*, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Haven 1974.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁵ *Emmanuel Levinas*, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, 1961; *Emmanuel Levinas*, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, The Hague 1981.

strides in becoming aware of otherness. In particular, the works of John McClure and Ronald Allen have sought to appropriate the insights of Levinas to homiletical theory.²⁶

John McClure argues in *Other-wise Preaching* that deconstruction does not necessarily yield negative results for preaching. In actuality, it creates possibilities. McClure makes the astute observation that “Sacred speech, which is fundamentally position-losing, or dis-positioned, testimonial speech mirrors in some ways our current cultural situation, in which all authorities are weakening and in which everything is interpretation, even the statement that everything is interpretation.”²⁷

Within such a situation, preaching must become reoriented toward the other. This is not only a philosophical concern, but also an ethical concern. The preacher can no longer be forced into binary modes of thinking, and the sermon must eschew attempts to create sameness. Preaching that takes into account the other is not only timely but necessary. Allen suggests that preachers can help congregations critique their tendencies toward sameness. This may apply toward the congregations understanding of God, the Bible and Christian tradition, as well as in regard to the congregation overall.²⁸

The shift toward the awareness of the other has created the realization that the sermon must find ways to be hospitable toward the other. Although the New Homiletic was an attempt to include the other in preaching, it has been found guilty of elevating the experience of the preacher above the experience of others.²⁹ Today’s sermon should look for ways of honoring otherness. Such a sermon seeks to raise the congregation’s awareness of an issue while respecting varying viewpoints. While the sermon does want the congregation to make a decision, the preacher realizes that the choice is up to the congregants. The sermon does not seek to be the final word but rather seeks to make a contribution to a conversation. “In this approach the pulpit is not a lectern at center stage but a chair placed at the edge of the conversation table.”³⁰ The aim of the sermon is to help the listeners participate in the ongoing conversation about what is at stake.

²⁶ John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*, St. Louis 2001; Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights*, St. Louis 2014.

²⁷ John S. McClure (note 26), 7.

²⁸ Allen (note 26), 34–37.

²⁹ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*, Nashville 1995, 42–45; Lucy A. Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Louisville 1997, 78–81; Ronald J. Allen/O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Sermon without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching*, Nashville 2015, 40.

³⁰ O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach*, Louisville 2005, 58.

3. Otherness and Sermon Form

Perhaps as a result of the New Homiletic's obsession with form, comparatively little attention has been given to sermon form in the aforementioned texts. This is understandable and even commendable. Allen and Allen suggest that preachers need "a variety of forms that will allow them to participate in the church's and culture's ongoing conversations in different ways."³¹ If the sermon is viewed as conversation, then it must be said that "In conversation, no one form of speech is appropriate at all times."³²

Of the several potential forms proposed by Allen and Allen, I wish to investigate further the "panel discussion." Within this sermon form, "a preacher could structure a sermon by naming the issue and resources, and then looking at one interpretative option after another according to some logical sequence, such as the order in which the options appeared in history or different dimensions of the topic."³³ I wish to contend that the topical sermon is one way that this can be achieved.

A potential danger of referencing only one text during the sermon is that the voice of the other may not be heard. If one acknowledges that the biblical testimony is filled with a variety of voices and viewpoints, then it is to the congregation's benefit that such viewpoints receive a fair hearing. Doing so can potentially lead to a deeper awareness of the other.

4. Toward a Proposal

At this point it might be helpful to return to Buttrick, Allen, and Pape and attempt to find points of intersection which can contribute to the development of a conversational approach to topical preaching. Two themes in particular are noteworthy. First, the topical sermon should attempt to shape the awareness and consciousness of the congregation.³⁴ Second, Scripture can be used in the topical sermon as long as one understands that there is a working theology in place through which one decides upon appropriate Scriptures.³⁵

The topical preaching for which I am advocating will allow multiple voices from the biblical canon a fair and gracious hearing. This type of preaching does not take the place of the sermon that is rooted in a particular text. However, it may be that a steady diet of sermons that begin with the text can be viewed as laying the groundwork for the topical sermon. Within this paradigm, the expository sermon allows the congregation to become acquainted with a variety of voices. The

³¹ *Allen/Allen* (note 29), 132.

³² *Allen* (note 30), 71.

³³ *Allen/Allen* (note 29), 133.

³⁴ *Buttrick* (note 3), 430; *Allen* (note 1), 10; *Pape* (note 19), 71.

³⁵ *Buttrick*, (note 3), 420; *Allen*, (note 1), 6; *Pape* (note 19), 64.

topical sermon then allows these voices to talk to one another.³⁶ The sermon does not condemn some voices and elevate others (one is reminded of Luther's denigrating comments about James), but rather allows all to be heard at their best. The listening community may be relieved to know that there is not a clear "Christian position" on a variety of issues.³⁷

A responsible conversational topical sermon might begin with an investigation of a current topic. Next, the sermon can move to a theological understanding of a topic, noting one's biases and presuppositions. Finally, the sermon can consult voices within the biblical canon and larger tradition, allowing them to speak to one another graciously. It should be acknowledged that other traditions might choose different texts.

Such a sermon is an attempt to model healthy conversation. It could be beneficial to allow some voices to speak which rarely get heard (Jude, for instance). Or, it could be helpful to allow voices which are sometimes viewed as competing voices to talk to each other (Paul and James). Still yet, the listeners might benefit from knowing that even Jesus is portrayed in differing ways. A creative sermon could potentially place the Markan Jesus in conversation with the Johannine Jesus. How might Jesus speak with Jesus in a panel discussion?

4.1 A Sample Sermon

For the benefit of the reader, I will conclude by providing a sample conversational topical sermon. The following sermon is intended for a community that is on the brink of a major decision and wrestling with understandings of discernment. The question has been raised, "How can we sense God's presence in this?" The sermon is an attempt to allow multiple voices to be heard, thus avoiding the violence of one person who claims to have received *the* word from God. The desired response to the sermon is not *yes* or *no*, but rather the desire to enter into deeper conversation with the other. The sermon sketch is divided into three parts: the sermon begins with an exploration of the topic, moves to a theological understanding of the topic, and then allows several voices to contribute to the conversation.³⁸ A few footnotes will be provided along the way to explain why various moves have been made.

³⁶ I am here attempting to follow Pape's suggestion that a topic be placed in the presence of another. In other words, I am suggesting that the topical sermon can result when the topic is placed in front of multiple voices and each is allowed to contribute to the conversation. I realize the limitations of such an approach. Namely, a narrative critical approach may potentially be applied to texts of other genres. Additionally, this approach assumes that one can come to know something about the author of a text through the reading of the text.

³⁷ Allen, (note 1), 34.

³⁸ Ideally, the sermon should also dialogue with voices throughout the history of the church. However, for the sake of space and simplicity, only Scripture is consulted.

Move 1: The Topic

“God said to me.” Let’s be honest. Those four words scare people. A Jewish rabbi friend of mine once commented that few things scare a Jewish community more than when a Christian speaks the words, “God said to me.”³⁹

Much violence has been done in the name of God. Nations have gone to war and creation has been exploited all because of “the word of the Lord.” When we hear people talk about what God is doing in our midst, the responsible thing to do is to listen critically.

However, sometimes our critical listening skills can spiral downward into complete rejection. It is as if we think that the notion of discerning God’s voice must be rejected entirely. May I suggest that doing so might actually result in violence? If we stop listening for the still, small voice of God, there are inevitably louder voices that we may heed. When a charismatic leader marches into a community where God is seen as the distant clockmaker, trouble can follow.

Move 2: Theology

The Scriptures give us a testimony to the various ways that people of faith through the ages have sensed the activity of God. As this church is contemplating some major decisions, the Scriptures can remind us of the importance of consulting everyone. The Scriptures also remind us that God loves everyone. And because God loves everyone, God wants to be involved with everyone.

So, how is God moving among us? I want to suggest that there is not one correct answer to that question. Different people experience God in different ways. We must accept this diversity while still moving toward the common good of all.

Move 3: Inviting Voices from Scripture into the Conversation

Some people have experiences of God in dreams. Have you ever awoken from a good night’s sleep and felt like you had great clarity on a decision that was to be made? If we placed Joseph at our conversation table⁴⁰ this morning, we might find that Joseph discerned the next move through a

³⁹ The mention of someone from the Jewish community places Jews and Christians in conversation. This is an attempt at raising awareness to the fact that the conversations of the local church impacts other conversation circles. It is also an attempt to make the listener aware that the preacher is open to interfaith dialogue.

⁴⁰ Throughout the sermon I refer to the “conversation.” This sets a different tone than referring to it as a “difficult decision” or “debate.”

restful evening. Of course, there are usually those who don't think this is a very legitimate way of coming to a conclusion. Joseph's brothers sure weren't very congenial toward him.

Some people sense God's presence in nature. If Moses was here with us this morning, I wonder what he might say.⁴¹ I wonder how he might contribute to this conversation. He might tell us of how he noticed God in a bush. He might recount the story of how God used water to deliver the people. He might tell us about how God was in a cloud by day and a fire by night. There might be some people here like Moses – people who have a sense of God's presence through nature.

But nature is not the only way that our ancestors in faith discerned the will of God.⁴² Some folks took a roll of the dice. Moses' brother Aaron was quite confident in the Urim and the Thummim. And Moses was ok with the idea that not everyone was going to experience God through a bush. The Apostles also seem to have been part of the gambling crowd. When they were trying to replace Judas they cast lots. Some people in the church might be a bit more risky or bold than others when it comes to discerning God's will. But that's what community is for. Together, we can arrive at decisions.

There are some who are blessed to be able to see how circumstances work together. We can pull up a chair for Esther and Mordecai at our table. Esther and Mordecai can represent this approach in our conversation. Esther was the one who had been called for "such a time as this" (Esth 4:14). God has given some people the gift of being able to see how events in life are interrelated.

Then there are always the folks who feel like they just need to take some time alone – maybe go on a retreat. Jesus spent much time in prayer and fasting during his ministry. And the disciples seemed to have difficulty grasping that this was one way that Jesus encountered God. One time when Jesus was off praying, his disciples wanted to know why he wasn't with the people. "Everyone is searching for you" they said to him (Mark 1:37). We may need to give some people space, trusting that they will return with more clarity.

One thing we do know is that discerning God's will is not always comfortable. While God is the one who brings peace, there are times when the nearness of God doesn't make us feel good. Remember that the nearness of God resulted in the people placing Jesus on a cross.

⁴¹ I have not attempted to make an exact claim on the other (in this case Moses), but instead used tentative language as a way of respecting otherness. "I wonder what he might say."

⁴² This is also a move toward encouraging appreciation of others and interfaith dialogue. I refer to those within the Jewish story as "our ancestors in faith."

It could be that God is calling us to something new.⁴³ It may be that God is calling us to be something different in the world than we have been in the past.⁴⁴ Change is rarely comfortable. But whatever discomfort we experience in the process of discerning God's will, may it be from the call to become something new – and not from how my brothers and sisters uniquely experience God.

Conclusion

Preaching in postmodernity demands that preachers formulate an understanding of otherness. It is possible that by only consulting one text in the sermon, the sermon is silencing the other, and thus not modeling healthy communal conversation. This article has suggested that topical preaching needs to be revisited. A conversational topical approach to preaching will seek to allow the other to be heard. It does not seek to harmonize the texts but rather places the texts in conversation with one another, respecting the otherness of each witness.

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⁴³ I have again used tentative language purposefully. The sermon does not attempt to provide a definitive answer.

⁴⁴ In this case, the new way of being in the world is the openness to diverse experiences of God. The sermon is thus intended to function as a text in the Ricoeurian sense.